

Hartje Paper: The Gordian Knot and Alexander the Great

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A knot sits, tangled and unsolved for many years in the temple of Zeus in the ancient city of Gordium. Its shrunken fibrous laces are entwined together around a piece of dogwood bark, connected to a wooden wagon with a strong mythological story just as complex and disheveled as the tethered knot itself. A born leader approaches the knot's city from the east, not yet knowing about the knot's foretold secret. Hearing about the mythology and clandestine tale surrounding the Gordium puzzle, the Macedonian warlord tries his own hand to the intricate and multipart task of untying this strategically bound binding. After fiddling and much struggling ensues, as the knot remains unaffected, the dominating demi-god of Macedon starts to feel a very human sensation slither into his hands and soul, could he possibly not untie the Gordian Knot...

Alexander of Macedon, or as history knows him, Alexander the Great, was a warlord of all Asia during the early parts of the fourth century B.C. Some primary sources portray Alexander III as a great militant leader that conquered all of the Persian Empire in thirteen short years, while others see him as insane, psychotic, and lonely. Regardless of the opinions of ancient and contemporary authors and historians, Alexander was the leader among leaders, hosting thousands upon thousands of men that made up his immense army, "never in all the world was there another like him."¹ Nothing stood in his way, not people, not kings, not armies, not cities, or tasks of any sort. While Alexander was living and breathing, no earthly creature was bigger or smarter than him.

The Gordian Knot story arises from an ancient tale. A poor man named Gordius, who only had two oxen to his name, and a wooden wagon for them to pull, plough, and transport, made his way through his daily activities.² An eagle perched itself on top of the wagon until the day's work was finished, and Gordius took this as a sign or omen from the gods.³ He consulted an oracle and was told that the next man who entered the city on a wagon

would become the king of the Phrygians.⁴ This poor man ended up marrying the oracle and had a son named Midas. Eventually Midas came through the city gates on a wagon, and after debate, "Midas was put on the throne...made an end to their trouble and strife and laid up his father's wagon on the acropolis as a thanks-offering to Zeus King for sending the eagle."⁵

When attaching the yoke to the actual wagon, a "great number of thongs, closely tangled with one another and concealing their interlacings," were placed between the two.⁶ Afterwards, the oracles and seers stated that whoever untangles the knot would be, "destined to be king of the whole world."⁷ Hearing about this knot made Alexander even more eager to take and conquer the town. To him, he could possibly achieve two objectives: conquer the city and expand his rule, and untie the Gordian Knot solidifying yet another reason for why Alexander should be the ruler of the known world.

Alexander stared at the knot, not seeing any ends protruding, or a possible way or path to solve the puzzle. At this point in time, the young king was at odds with how to proceed. He was simply and utterly confused. Alexander wanted to unfasten the knot so badly, and the desire, the same stubborn desire to remain faithful to his father's unfinished work and go against the biggest army in Persia, "entered Alexander's mind of fulfilling the prophecy."⁸ The tension surrounding the sovereign king was so immense. Around him stood the natives of the land, the Phrygians, and also many members of Alexander's personal army, the Macedonians.⁹ Some questioned the outcome of the next few short and quick minutes that lay ahead of them. Alexander would not back down from the job that lies in his war-torn hands, "as his failure might possibly lead to public disturbances."¹⁰ While the great competitor contemplated his next move, his mixed audience, who stood circled around him as if they were the audience in the Roman Coliseum, was literally on their tiptoes waiting in anxiety,

uncertainty, and most of all suspense. Alexander then made his next and final move in this game of fame and power.

The king shouted, "it makes no difference how they are loosened," pulled out his sword and with a quick and speedy slash, cut straight through the

lacings that held the knot ever so tight.¹¹ Instead of manually undoing the knot, as every other person figured was the correct way to solve the puzzle and become king of the world, Alexander used his creativity and cleverness and made, not found, a second route to greatness. "I have undone it!"¹²

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Endnotes

¹ "The Campaigns of Alexander" by Arrian, Aubrey De Selincourt, trans., (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), Book VII, 30.

² Ibid., Book II, 3.

³ "Epitome of the Phillipic History of Pompeius Trogus" by Justin, J.C. Yardley, trans., (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997), Book XI, 7.5.

⁴ Ibid., Book XI, 7.6.

⁵ *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book II, 3.

⁶ "Quintus Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 69.

⁷ Plutarch, *Moralia IV*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 273. It should be stated

that the oracles and seers knew that the knot was extremely hard to untie, hence stating that the person who succeeded in untangling it would become king of the entire world. This person would have to be extremely smart and clever. Also, the world at that point in time was Asia or the Persian Empire.

⁸ *History of Alexander*, 69.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book II, 3.

¹¹ *History of Alexander*, 71.

¹² *The Campaigns of Alexander*, Book II, 3.